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061030Z Sep 05

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 004393

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TAGS: [TBIO](#) [EAGR](#) [ECON](#) [BG](#)

SUBJECT: RECENT CONFERENCE ON BIOTECHNOLOGY IN AGRICULTURE:
FOOD FOR THOUGHT

[11](#). SUMMARY: The U.S. Embassy and the Bangladesh Agricultural Research Council (BARC) held a successful conference on biotechnology in agriculture on August 24 in Dhaka. The conference targeted public and private sector opinion makers, researchers, government officials, and end-users in a position to influence the country's approach to agricultural biotechnology. Speakers from the U.S. and Bangladesh explored the myths and realities surrounding agricultural biotechnology, providing participants with factual information to use when discussing these issues. An additional evening session on media communications was also extremely popular and well received. Media coverage of the events was balanced and fair. Post extends its appreciation to EB and IIP for their assistance in organizing and funding this conference. END SUMMARY.

CONFERENCE EVENTS AND AUDIENCE REACTION

[12](#). The purpose of the conference was to highlight and correct common areas of misperception about biotechnology and the safety of genetically modified organisms in food and in the environment. Over 150 government officials, academics, NGO representatives and members of the private sector attended the one-day event.

[13](#). American speakers Nina V. Fedoroff and Channapatna S. Prakash spoke, along with Bangladeshi counterparts Emdadul Haque Chowdhury and Md. Abdur Razzaque, spoke on the myths and realities surrounding biotechnology in agriculture. Drs. Fedoroff and Chowdhury concentrated their lectures on food safety while Drs. Prakash and Razzaque focused on environmental issues. Three BDG Ministers (Agriculture; Environment; and Science, Information and Communication Technology), the Executive Chairman of the BARC, Chad Russell of USDA New Delhi and our Economic Chief, David Renz, addressed the opening session.

[14](#). The speakers traced the history of traditional plant breeding practices and argued that biotechnology was an extension of these practices. They noted that additional testing and safety protocols associated with bioengineered crops produced safer plant varieties. They discussed the benefits of bioengineered crops, including enhanced yields and reduced pesticide use, and safety issues. The speakers also explored some of the emotional and scientific objections raised against such crops. Finally, they touched on barriers to agricultural biotechnology, including regulatory and trade barriers, intellectual property rights issues, and the impact of media hype and misinformation on public perceptions.

[15](#). Participant questions and comments following each lecture were balanced and thoughtful, and addressed both the benefits of and concerns about agricultural biotechnology. A common theme was the loss of biodiversity and the health impacts of eating bioengineered crops. In response, the speakers defended their research; discussed safety and testing protocols; explained the impossibility of a vitamin A overdose from Golden Rice as the rice contains only a precursor molecule, which the body converts on an as-needed basis, not actual vitamin A; and noted the long-term use of bioengineered foods in the United States and other countries without adverse affects.

[16](#). Two invited NGO members of the staunchly anti-biotech community in Bangladesh (UBINIG and CAB, Consumers Association of Bangladesh) chose not to participate in the conference, instead distributing "No GMO" leaflets in the lobby outside the event. Their protest had no discernable impact on the conference.

[17](#). After the conference, several NGO representatives approached EconOff and stated that they felt much more positive about biotechnology than they had previously felt. Others, including an editor of The New Nation, commented later that the conference was focused and useful. FSN Embassy personnel seated in the audience said that those seated around them were generally making positive comments about the material presented and its contribution to their

understanding of the issue.

SPECIAL EVENING SESSION ON RISK COMMUNICATION

18. A special evening seminar at BARC's offices focused on risk communication and techniques for effective media interaction. The session drew a capacity crowd of about 50 researchers and academics, many of whom are often interviewed by the press. In his presentation, Dr. T. Clint Nesbitt covered the need for honesty in communicating through the media to the public about situations that they perceive as being risky. He cautioned the assemblage not to discount public concerns or to dismiss them as overly emotional or foolish. Instead, he explained that the public will be far more likely to accept a change in any element of their lives if they are given complete information and the capacity to make their own choices.

19. In the discussion that followed, participants described the challenges they face in dealing with the local media, which they criticized as sensationalist and lacking in journalistic ethics. Dr. Nesbitt worked with his audience on how to initiate stories, how to deal with a cold call from a reporter and how to tell a journalist "I don't know" without subsequently getting lambasted in the press. Participants said they would welcome future workshops on the same topic.

MEDIA COVERAGE

10. Post sponsored an evening press roundtable on August 23 and issued a press release the day after the conference. Embassy's success in obtaining the participation of three Ministers in the opening session helped ensure print and media coverage of the conference, including reports during the evening television news broadcasts. Participants also included journalists who cover environment, agriculture and health issues. In addition to featured coverage in The New Nation, an English-language daily with respectable circulation, at least seven other local papers reported on the conference. Coverage of the event was generally positive, with almost all papers simply using the United News of Bangladesh wire service text.

CHAMMAS